

# THREATENED & ENDANGERED

# SPECIES

## Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

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**T**he red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW), *Picoides borealis*, was once a widely distributed and relatively abundant species across the southeastern United States. With the loss of preferred old growth pine habitat and changes in land management practices beginning in the early 1800s, the decline of the species began. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service listed the RCW as an endangered species in 1970. By the time of listing, the species had declined to fewer than 10,000 individuals in small, widely scattered, isolated populations. Despite protection under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the numbers of RCWs continued to decline throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s in many parts of the species' range.

The RCW is a relatively small woodpecker averaging 20 cm (8 inches) in length and weighing approximately 40-55 grams (1.4 to 1.9 oz.). It is black and white with prominent white cheek patches which extend from the base of the bill to the back of the neck. It is black above, with black and white barring on its backs and wings. The throat and belly are white to grayish white with distinct black spots along the sides of the breast. Bills are black and legs are gray to black. Plumage in males and females is very similar and difficult to distinguish in the field. Adult males have a few red feathers located between the black crown and the white cheek patch but these feathers are not easily seen unless the bird is in hand.

RCWs are endemic to the southeastern U.S. Their range originally extended from Maryland and Kentucky west to Missouri and south to Texas and Florida. Within their range, red-cockaded woodpeckers



John and Karen Hollingsworth, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

require specific habitat types for nesting and feeding. The preferred nesting habitat includes mature or old growth live pine trees, with an open, park-like environment with very few hardwoods present. In this habitat, RCWs excavate cavities that are approximately 6-10 inches deep and 3-5 inches in diameter in living pine trees. Old growth pines are selected for cavity excavation because of their susceptibility to the red heart fungus that makes excavation easier. However, the excavation process usually takes several months to complete. RCWs also prefer to feed on the boles of living pine trees greater than 9 inches in diameter.

Red-cockaded woodpeckers live in small groups that share and actively defend small territories throughout the year around their nesting and roost trees.

RCWs are one of the few bird species found in the United States that exhibit cooperative breeding. Cooperative breeding refers to a social system that involves some mature individuals that may be assisted by others in the rearing of young. In these breeding systems, a mated pair of adult woodpeckers may function alone, be accompanied by the current year's offspring, or be assisted by a few helpers which are usually the male offspring from the previous year.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is a highly monogamous species that nests once a year, but is capable of re-nesting if the first nest attempt fails. Approximately 20 percent of all nesting attempts are unsuccessful. Predation, nest desertion, and kleptoparasites seem to be responsible for most nest failures. Age is also strongly correlated with reproductive success. Successful nesting attempts usually produce two to five eggs, which are laid in late April to early May. After 10 days of incubation, the eggs will hatch and young are capable of flight in 24-29 days.

Today, the value of timber precludes the maintenance of mature pine forests in most of the RCW's range. Also, the suppression of wildfires and decreased use of prescribed burning has led to the encroachment of hardwood mid-story into mature pine stands, which deters utilization by RCWs. The remainder of the population is found primarily on publicly owned and managed lands which are dedicated to the preservation of the red-cockaded woodpecker.

For more information on the red-cockaded woodpecker, please contact Jeremy Lowery, Wildlife Biologist, at (205) 468-3172. ☎